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ABSTRACT

The emotional transitions basic writers have to make when they enter the academic setting can be overwhelming. Basic writers tend to have a host of problems and obstacles to overcome, not the least of which are their own anxieties. One way to alleviate some of the anxieties and insecurities is through a studio or workshop course staffed with classroom teachers and peer instructors. One advantage of this approach, such as the one used in a course at Tarleton State University (Texas), is that it decenters the instructor, focusing instead on the students' needs. Rather than lecturing, the instructor works with the students through the composing process 3 days per week. In addition, each student has additional lab time for independent work on computers, and for individual help from instructors and tutors. Peer tutors are prepared for their role in the course with a rigorous training program that uses actual student papers to demonstrate holistic grading, and which prepares the tutors for the anxiety and hostility they will encounter. The tutor's role is to reduce anxiety by bridging the gap between the students and the instructors. Although the studio/peer instructor approach is not a blanket solution to all the problems surrounding basic writing programs, it is a step in the right direction. (PRA)

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Emotional Transitions: The Studio/Peer Instructor Approach to Basic Writing

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Emotional Transitions: The Studio/Peer Instructor Approach to Basic Writing

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INTRODUCTION

The emotional transitions basic writers have to make when they enter the academic setting can be overwhelming. Basic writers tend to have a host of problems and obstacles to overcome, not the least of which are their own anxieties. These anxieties can be virtually debilitating to some of these students. There are ways, however, to alleviate some of these anxieties and insecurities. Our approach to working toward overcoming these problems has been to develop a "studio," or workshop, course staffed with classroom teachers and peer instructors. Such a course allows many students to become not only better writers, but more self-assured individuals.

ANXIETY AND BASIC WRITERS

First, it is crucial to recognize that many basic writers have very real fears about writing. These fears take many forms, from blocking to avoidance (Rose). For the past three semesters, I have administered a writing anxiety survey to the basic writing classes at Tarleton State University. This survey is based on the 26-item Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Survey (Daly). In addition to these items, I also added three questions which deal with general academic anxiety. Originally, I administered the survey only to basic writing classes, with predictable results: that most basic writers expressed anxiety concerning some aspects of writing. I then became curious to see whether the basic writers were any more anxious than writers enrolled in other levels of our composition sequence, so I administered the survey to students in all

three levels of our freshman composition series (Basic Writing, Freshman Composition 1 and 2) and the first level of technical writing (a sophomore course). The findings suggest that basic writers are indeed more anxious about writing than students in other levels of the composition courses. Basic writers seemed particularly anxious when they were required to write under pressure in a specific time frame. Essays written in class (including the final examination) were the pressure situations cited most often as anxiety-producing.

A good bit of the basic writers' anxieties seemed to be tied to fears of failure. Many expressed feelings of low self-esteem, which manifested itself in comments such as, "It doesn't matter how hard I try, I fail. I just don't know why." This trying and failing time after time reinforces the idea of failure, something many of these students have experienced all their lives. Writing, in other words, is just one more chance to prove to themselves that they are unsuccessful. With this background and these odds of failing yet again, it is no wonder that a great many basic writers quickly become overwhelmed with the demands of the academic discourse community.

There are ways to alleviate some of our basic writers' distress, even if it seems we are chipping away at a stone mountain. We believe that one way is through course design.

COURSE DESIGN

Our approach to teaching basic writing has been to combine two compatible ideas: the workshop approach to teaching writing and peer instructors (tutors).

The workshop or "studio" component of the course derives from Roger

Garrison's one-on-one approach to freshman composition. One of the many benefits of this approach is that it decenters the instructor, focusing instead on students' needs, and, we believe, helping to reduce their anxieties. First, by decentering the instructor, the students' needs are placed at the forefront. Rather than continually lecturing, the instructor works with the students through the composing process. Clearly, class size often prevents instructors the luxury of conducting classes in a total workshop atmosphere, but, despite this, the workshop component is the core of the course. The studio approach is most effective in a "lab" situation where the students tend to write most intensively. (Our course meets three days a week, and each student has a additional one-hour lab time.) In our lab, students work independently on computers, with the lab supervisor and the peer instructors available to give individual attention as needed. As in Garrison's arrangement, this approach allows instructors to circulate around and make quick commentary on the students' papers as they are in process. We think that this arrangement gives students the right balance of independence and assistance to help them believe in themselves as writers.

The peer instructors, the second component of the course, are absolutely vital to the success of what we are doing. We have been fortunate to have funding for our peer instructors through a Title III grant. We draw them from a pool of upper level English majors who intend to work with writers as a part of their professional careers. Although we have the utmost confidence in the people we choose to be peer tutors, we also understand that their experiences with writers are limited. To help prepare the peer instructors for the challenges they will face, we require them to attend a rigorous training session prior to the beginning of each semester. English department faculty

comprise the program and various issues are addressed in the sessions. We typically begin with an overview of the course and move into the unique characteristics of the basic writer. The peer instructors benefit from our experiences with particular circumstances and scenarios with which we, as basic writing teachers, have dealt. Since we have only recently acquired computers for use in the lab, we also discuss the value of the computer for basic writers (McAllister and Louth 1988), and the peer instructors actually have the opportunity to use the word processing program before they begin to work with the students in the lab.

Perhaps the most valuable part of training session is when the peer tutors see actual student writing. We think it is unrealistic and unfair to expect peer instructors to be able to analyze basic writers' unique problems without first being trained to do so. We have culled out papers previous basic writing classes that represent the quality of writing the peer tutors will encounter. At this point, we discuss holistic grading and what types of issues to focus on in a basic writing paper. As a group, we discuss several of the sample papers, and the peer instructors actually evaluate the papers according to a holistic rubric. The peer instructors are quite typically unprepared for the magnitude of the problems they see in these papers. Because the problems in the papers are often a manifestation of other problems, such as anxiety, we also discuss the emotional dimension of the basic writers. Until the peer tutors have actually experienced the hostilities and hysterics, they are reluctant to truly believe how much impact emotions sometimes have on these particular students.

The peer instructors can help reduce our students' anxieties by bridging the gap between course instructors and the writers. Normally we operate on a

ratio of one course instructor and one peer instructor for every five students enrolled in the lab at that time. This insures that the writers will receive as much attention as they need in the course of the hour. By the second week of class, when writers begin their first assignment, their struggles became obvious. At this point the writers are very dependent on the course instructor, so we insist that the peer instructors take it upon themselves to assist the students. Very soon most of the writers begin to wean themselves from the classroom instructors and gain trust in the peer instructors. Generally by four weeks into the semester, the writers are comfortable with the peer instructors, reacting favorably toward their help. In fact, a "bonding" often occurs between writers and peer instructors. We believe that this trust can work to alleviate some of the insecurities that the basic writers have about themselves and their writing ability. An added benefit is that, at this point, the classroom teacher becomes an orchestrator and troubleshooter rather than the dominant force in the room.

All this is not to say that we don't have occasional problems with peer instructors. "The peer tutor told me to do it, and I failed the paper," is an old standby excuse. Usually a student who uses it though has written a non-passing paper regardless; however, this is the point when the classroom instructor must not only reassure the student that the peer instructor is competent, but also discuss some of these issues with the peer instructors. Even though the classroom teacher and the peer instructors have a close working relationship, it is necessary to set aside time, on a regular basis, to air any issues that are disturbing or problematic. The lines of communication must be kept open in order for any peer instructor program to be successful.

Although the studio/peer instructor approach is not a blanket solution to all the problems surrounding basic writing programs, it is a step in the right direction. Clearly,—because of their backgrounds and typical anxiety levels—basic writers need the most individual attention, support, and understanding of all students who are attempting academic pursuits. The studio approach provides the individual attention, and the peer instructors provide the support and understanding.

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